

- [Home](#)
- [About](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Extras↓](#)
- [Links](#)
- [Donate](#)
- [Blog](#)

The Poppy Snow Thanks Special:

“The Holiday Spirit Knows No Mercy”

Erma swallowed anxiously. Rachel had dragged them deep through the woods near their home to catch Summer beetles, and they had taken pause at the mouth of an ominous cave they hadn't noticed before. Tremors from a nearby mageyser had shot a crack deep down the cliff face, revealing an opening that had been sealed by landslides some months ago. Erma saw Rachel's ears twitch as the quiet darkness confronted them, and she knew it was going to be impossible to keep her out. She admired her sister's sense of excitement for the unknown, as she'd never known it for herself. Rachel took a step off the path, but found resistance as Erma tugged at her sleeve.

“W-w-wait, we shouldn't...” She stuttered quietly. “Mom'll get mad, and it- it looks dangerous.”

“Don't be such a wuss,” Rachel scoffed. “Even Shirley's braver than you, and you've got ten years on her.” Erma took a reactionary glance at the tagalong kitten, who puffed her chest out and smirked in an attempt to appeal. In that instant of misdirection, Rachel darted past her, before Erma could grab her sleeve again. “Uh oh, better hurry up, I'm gonna go into this scary ca-a-ave!” She laughed, slipping into the darkness, and then went silent. Erma waited for a further taunt at her expense, a prodding remark, any sort of noise at all, but her sister was being uncharacteristically quiet, as if she had simply vanished into the void. She gripped Shirley's wrist hard enough to elicit loud yowling complaints, and in short, cautioned bursts, skittered closer to the mouth of the cave.

“R-Rachel?” she squeaked, her voice caught in the back of her throat, ripping at it with barbs of panic. Erma was mere feet away from the cast shadow that marked the boundary between the world she knew and the unblinking gaze that was her own fear. She saw hundreds of illusionary faces swirling within the darkness, tiny shifts of imagined light that left her heart ablaze and her feet frozen cold. It was Shirley who impatiently pulled her the last few steps until they finally joined the darkness themselves, and as her eyes slowly adjusted to the light, she found...

Nothing. No faces, no void, just a damp, ordinary cave with small patches of moss growing on the ceiling. Just as Erma was starting to catch her breath, she felt a sudden jab in the back followed by a loud shriek, sending her heart through her lungs and up her throat. She turned to see Rachel leaning against a lip in the cave wall, cackling at her own cruel joke.

“Ahh ha ha haah! You scaredy-puss!” Rachel teased. Her delight quickly turned to guilt however, as she took a closer look at her sister, frantically brushing tears from her cheeks, a small dark spot growing on the front of her dress. “Hell, Erma, I just wanted to spook you a bit, I didn't think you'd pee yourself.” Her non-apology was non-interrupted by Erma's withered frame shoving her against the wall.

“Why are you like this!? I hate you!” It was the final straw for the meeker cat, who ineffectually beat at Rachel's shoulders with shaking paws.

“Hey, cut it out! You're gonna get me smelling like piss too!”

"You deserve it!" she sobbed. "You're a horrible little piss goblin! You could have fallen down a hole, or slipped onto the rocks, or- oruh-" She choked on her words, hot tears streaming over her lips.

"Okay, I get it. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have worried you like that." Rachel put her hands on her sister's shoulders. "Look, how about we go home, get you a clean dress, and we'll just let Mom know about this place, okay?" Erma nodded slowly, and they took each other's hand. "Alright. Let's get go-" but then, Rachel stopped, her eyes going wide. "Where's Shirley?"

They both looked further down the cave in unison, panic gripping their cores. There was no time for personal concern or fear, they held hands tighter and made a dash inwards, narrowly avoiding slipping every few frantic steps. After a minute of madly groping the walls, they made their way to an open atrium, a large hole in the ceiling illuminating the space, casting their attention to the small figure at the center of it.

They saw their precious little sister, unharmed and unfazed, and a deep relief filled their entire beings.

Then, as they got closer, they saw the fresh, frozen corpse curled behind the rock she was standing on. And they screamed.

Petunia Quibble screamed as well, when a large hand gripped her shoulder.



"Poppy!! You-! Scared the living daylight's out of me!" Petunia held the book to her chest, her hands shivering dramatically. She was never a woman known for reserved displays of emotion.

"Whoa there, boss," Poppy backed off, chuckling. "I just wanted to let you know I took the laundry in." Petunia glanced toward the windows. There were soft patters of drizzling rain starting up on the panes.

"Ah- Yes, of course, thank you."

"That must be a real engrossing read if you couldn't hear me clomping around for once." Poppy gestured to the glossy cover in Petunia's deathgrip, now somewhat wrinkled.

“Oh, uh, I suppose so, yes. It’s a horror anthology that came in this morning,” Petunia said, trying to settle back into a graceful posture. Poppy took a seat beside her, her weight causing the armrest beneath her to sag heavily. She still insisted on acting as the house maid, despite her upcoming promotion to ambassador, which Petunia suspected was so she could have an excuse to keep wearing the uniform. She would probably even continue to have new excuses after moving to the Queen’s castle, since... they’re now...

Petunia pursed her lips, refusing to humor that train of thought any further.

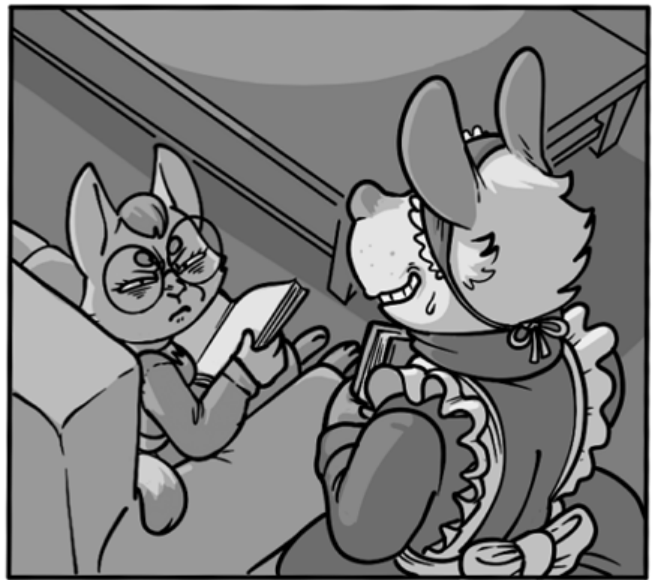
“I never took you as one for horror, Tuna,” Poppy interrupted, to her relief.

“I’m not, usually. But this month they had a publication from one of my favorite authors, Wallflower P. It’s a story about some young girls who find a frozen corpse in the middle of Summer.”

“Huh. That sounds... kind of familiar.” Poppy’s eyebrows scrunched, deep in thought. “Hey, who’d you say wrote this story?”

“Wallflower P! She has such a romantic way of describing horror that really speaks to me.” Petunia swooned, as if talking about stories involving seductive man-eaters, rather than... literal man-eaters. “I own all of her books in both English and the original Trench, you know,” she said, becoming somewhat self-satisfied as she pushed a 1st-edition of a book titled *‘The Hollow Back’* into Poppy’s hands. The opossum immediately flipped past the text, and studied the author’s bio printed on the dust jacket. “Now, admittedly she’s a little obscure, so I don’t think you would have heard of h-“

“Oh, actually, she’s my sister.”



“Okay, you’re actively messing with me now.”

“No, really, she’s one of my sisters. Her real name’s Cheiri Possum. I told you I was adopted by a Trench family of cats, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, but- I mean- Just- What are the chances!?” Petunia sputtered. Poppy suddenly dropped into her life but seemed to know just about everyone in some way, and she was beginning to feel like she was just some side character in someone else’s story.

“Look, maybe I can introduce you two someday. Anyway, I’m gonna go get dinner started, sorry for interrupting your little horror sesh.” And with that, Poppy clomped back out, her large tail curling gracefully past the door frame. Petunia tried not to get giddy about the idea of meeting one of her idols until she knew she was alone again, and even then, allowed herself only a few scant seconds of excited vibrating in her seat before she allowed herself to get caught up in the words on the page in front of her.

Rachel and Erma sat in bed, sharing a cool towel as their mother laid out fresh clothes for the both of them. They were shivering intensely despite the summer heat, and other adults from the town filled out their den like a hoarder's desk, questions flying left and right. The atmosphere was heavy with unease as the search party that went to check the cave returned with their findings. The two girls peeked from their window at a stunted figure laying in their front yard, draped and wrapped in a thick sheet and ties, its ghoulish shape all too recognizable to them. They had only looked upon him for a second before they grabbed their sister and fled, but the image was burnt into Erma's mind permanently, like a brand on wood.

"Oh, for Felis' Fur," their mother started, looking through the glass, "Why did those idiots bring that ghastly thing here?" She stormed down the stairs and audibly parted the chaos in the den, reemerging in the front yard, gesticulating wildly in the way only an irritated parent can. She waved the men off in the direction of the clinic, pointing back at the bedroom window, presumably in reference to her traumatized daughters. Shirley, for her part, was taking everything rather well, as she sat at her miniature tea table, enjoying a popsicle.

Petunia paused for a second. It occurred to her that she could no longer visualize Shirley as anything other than what she assumed Poppy to have been like in her youth. Maybe that was just a coincidence, but she couldn't shake the feeling this story may have had some personal inspiration. She read further ahead, as the narrator described the ensuing town meeting.

The coroner stepped forth.

"It's been over eight hours since young Folgere's body was recovered, and it still hasn't shown any signs of defrosting, even after we applied the sun lamps. Furthermore, while it was found within a cave, it was left directly exposed to sunlight during that time." She laced her fingers. "I think it's safe to confirm that shortly after going missing early last winter, Folgere was..." she shivered as she spoke. "Caught by the Specter of Winter." There were murmurs from the crowd as she confirmed their suspicions. From the doorway, Erma put her hand to her mouth as she considered the full implications of her words.

She knew the stories of the Specters of Winter; of course, every child is warned never to leave the safety of their home when the annual blizzards begin. In the Winter times, the Specters roamed the land, gigantic shadows that chased disoriented travelers and stole their warmth with a single touch. But she wasn't a child anymore. She no longer believed in Faeries or the Mother of Mercy, and she had long since assumed that the Specters were just how parents explained the dangers of the cold winds to their impressionable children. But here they were, talking about them as a real, tangible danger. And what's more, a body frozen solid for months, permanently devoid of heat? She couldn't ignore it, or attempt to rationalize it away, she had seen it for herself.

The following pages flew by as Petunia devoured the story. Erma's Summer passed into Fall, which quickly passed into the inklings of Winter, and the dread mounted. Shirley had gone missing again, quietly beckoned into the woods mere hours before the blizzard was set to hit. Petunia bit at her claws as Erma and Rachel searched desperately, every word stringing her along, wondering whether this story's ending would be happy or tragic. Finally, she turned to the last page.

Erma scooped armfuls of snow from the small mound before her. Her heart sank as she saw Shirley's tiny form curled up, unmoving. She immediately pulled her under her sweaters, and her terror melted away as she felt the softest signs of cold breath and shivering against her tummy.

But then she heard it. The loud crack that signified the change in the skies above. The winds picked up, almost mechanical in their rhythm, and the air around her started to become whiter with each passing second. She took one last clear look at home's lights and oriented her internal compass on it. And she ran. Her legs ached, and her throat burned, but she knew she couldn't afford to stop for even an instant. She knew if she so much as turned around, they would end up found only after the snow melted, looking just like that twisted, terrified corpse they had seen that Summer. She felt a rasping breath in her ears, and cold shadowy hands closing around her neck, and it was not her imagination. Nothing she could imagine felt like this.

And then, just like that, the gates closed behind her and she was surrounded by a bright light. Her family threw their arms around her, tears in their eyes, and the other townsfolk soon followed. Erma sank to her knees, and was quickly picked up and brought in for rounds of warm baths and cocoa. They would be thankful for that Winter, at least.

Some days later, Erma noticed Shirley leaning up against the wall, listening intently, her eyebrows scrunched, deep in thought.

"And what's all this?" she asked.

"Shhh!" Shirley stuck her finger to her lips. "Mama told me all about the Speckles of Winter, so I'm listenin' out for them."

"Well," Erma laughed gently. "I don't think you're going to hear anyon-" She paused as her ear brushed against the wall.

Somewhere, half a kilometer away, a soft noise cut right up to her ear through the wind and wood.

It was breathing. Waiting.

Petunia shut the book, her eyes wide and her mouth taut.

She listened to the patters of rain slowly turn into pings of hail and she slowly let herself drift into a catnap.

The first day of Winter was tomorrow.



Eggtown could be described most easily as "overly literal." A small town built into the remains of a colossal egg, supposedly the origin point of a long-dead dragon that had been left abandoned for centuries. Whatever potential value the structure had, it had just been considered an eyesore by the sheep kingdom that had long harbored it. Attempts to extract the dense material from the shell proved fruitless, any practical uses it had weren't worth the effort required to dislodge pieces of it. It was too heavy to fashion armor from and hardly any more durable than any more common metals or ceramics. Attempts to utilize it as a military structure were considered redundant due to its poor location, at the bottom of a huge pit, dwarfed by the shade of the already naturally well-fortified Ovis Tree that served as the kingdom's capital. After the nation was absorbed into the Canine Empire, there was a brief attempt to market it as a mythical attraction that ended as quietly as it began. It was ultimately just a big stupid egg that took up space, so when Mr. Quibble offered to buy up the unused land from Canopy, he had to spend less of his dwindling fortune than he expected. He spent the next several years funding the construction of a small, simple gated community within the egg and along the walls, a dream of creating an inexpensive shelter for outcasts inspired by his brushes with destitution in his youth. At the center of the town atop a large man-made hill was his own manor, a pointlessly large home where he and his daughter lived alone, an artifact of the high standards he held from his failed marriage. His tenants found it hard to resent him, however, as he was otherwise generous and earnest to a fault.

Poppy had been living there for almost half a year now, her shabby home situated squarely in the Quibble's backyard. She had traveled to Eggtown after hearing rumors that they took in all sorts, although it became clear quickly that opossums were still a new adjustment for them, the absent-minded Mr. Quibble aside. In retrospect, she realized she was making a considerable gamble just showing up there, one that almost

didn't pay off. She had spent the last of her money on entering the Fenneclands, a rare opportunity for legal immigration for her, and if things hadn't worked out, she certainly couldn't afford the rent in Canopy proper. She and Lily would have had to set up their home somewhere in the wilderness, subject to the environment and the beasts that still roamed Flora's untamed countrysides. Poppy, of course, could handle that, she had spent a few years roughing it already, but Lily had a hard enough time living in the various small towns they'd migrated from, and the country was no place for a child. Especially not during...

A snowflake nipped at Poppy's right ear, startling her. Seven hours from now, the world would go dark and cold, as it did each year, like clockwork. It was the first day of Winter.

Poppy looked up from her spot in the Quibble's garden, where she had been pulling the last batch of crops the year would bring. The sky was growing gray, a light drizzle of snow coming through the large hole in the egg shell above. A set of sun lamps hung at the center of Eggton's inner space, attached to the network of wooden and steel walkways that connected the inside floors of the massive shell's wall. Aside from the manor, it was the single most expensive structure in the community to maintain, but every soul in the town was grateful to it. For most of the year, it only emitted a very slight light to compensate for the darkness the high town walls created, but in the winter, it was their greatest defense, providing them with crucial warmth and light that the specters outside couldn't withstand. Poppy winced and silently swore as one of the lights suddenly cranked up, she had unfortunately happened to look just as they were calibrating them for the month ahead. Turning back to the garden, she tugged at sharrots while futilely trying to rub the bright spot out of her eye. A bout of temporary blindness was a fine price to pay for the knowledge that they'd have a perfectly bright winter.

"Ooh, looks like we won't be lacking for stews this winter!" Petunia rubbed the pads of her hands together and breathed on them, almost exaggeratedly so. It was clear she wasn't really that cold, she just liked making a little show of it. She grabbed one of the hefty baskets by the handle, her thin arms straining to move it.

"Don't push it, those baskets are loaded to my standards," Poppy warned her, effortlessly propping an overflowing basket onto her shoulder to demonstrate. "Try taking the peppers, they're lighter than they look." As she watched Petunia gingerly bring the smaller basket up to waist level, Poppy found it hard to believe this woman was supposed to physically excel in anything, let alone be her superior in the martial arts. With a smirk, she stealthily pulled off one last pepper in the coil of her tail and decided to play a little trick, lobbing it at the shaking cat who had turned from her. "Hey Quibble, think fast!"

Petunia likely did not think at all. With a slight shake of the basket in her arms and without even looking, the pepper vanished from thin air and reappeared perched at the top of the pile, in a manner so fluidly as to suggest she had practiced this exact motion hundreds of thousands of times.

"Please don't fool around, Poppy," she chided out of reflex. "Things tend to break when you fool around."

"Hey, don't get dramatic. It's not like I broke the front gate again or something," Poppy laughed, waving her free hand without a care.

"Ah yes. That. Perhaps we should just be thankful the hinges were fixed before Winter, hmm?" Petunia was obviously attempting to guilt trip her, but Poppy immediately and bluntly deflected it with her own oblivious agreement.

"Right, but I think tradition says to save the thanks for after Winter." Poppy looked past the Quibble manor, down to the front of the town where the gates sat. They were closed up, but unbarred at the moment, in case anyone needed to get in or out before the snowstorm began. There was a slight discoloration around the hinges, new material inlaid around them to replace the bits of shell that tore off when she first arrived in town and inadvertently knocked both doors loose.

To the right of the gate was a small guard house, staffed by a pair of small guard dogs.

Bow and Wowzowski were having a very boring evening. Eggton wasn't the kind of place that really needed active guards to begin with, but Winter usually at least brought a couple moments of excitement when Bow got to laugh at the stragglers stumbling to the front gate as if Winter was going to start mere moments before they got back. It

seemed as though the typical slackers had finally taken their lessons to heart, as this year had nothing of the sort. Just a vast field of white powder and a frozen lake to stare at. Making matters worse, the window had gotten frozen slightly ajar, allowing a soft breeze to slip in. Bow groaned, if only to give his voice something to do besides shiver.

“Diggin’ cold. Hate this season. Wish the blizzard would start already so we can get off this stupid post.” He grumbled to a partner he know wasn’t going to have much to say. Wowzowski had become obnoxiously committed to his little ‘stunned silent’ comedy act since Summer. It was a cute little running gag to the townsfolk who occasionally checked up on them, but it made him enormously dull to hang around as much as Bow was required to. He just sat there day in and out, sipping his coffee, eyes locked ahead. “Okay, come on, that Odel-ay-hee-Possum lady’s been here for like, three months now.” Bow threw his hands up. “Oooh, she threw a door really far! Wow! We *all* know she’s got some kind of weirdo possum super strength by now, Wowzowski, you’re not special.”

Silence. Sip of coffee.

“I mean, it’s not even the craziest thing that’s happened since she got here,” Bow shrugged. “Like, she fought in that tournament, apparently picked up some gang groupies- you remember those knuckleheads banging on the gate? She fought that dragon... And she’s some kind of diplomat now? How does *that* work?” Suddenly, Wowzowski broke character, and slowly turned his head to face his partner.

“She fought a dragon?” He crinkled his nose, blinking for maybe the first time in four minutes.

“Wh- It was all over the news.”

“Oh. I... guess I didn’t notice.”

“You were interviewed for an article they wrote about it!” Bow gestured to one of the newspapers on the wall, where the world’s least informative interview did, in fact, hang. “Frankly, I can’t believe they actually published it. Print media’s getting desperate.” He coughed and opened his mouth to continue, but was interrupted by a loud cracking noise far above them, followed by loud klaxons from Canopy.

The sky was growing dark, and on the rim of the cliffs surrounding the Ovis Tree, Bow could see a huge wave of wind and snow flowing down the side like water bursting from a dam. There was always something that felt unnatural about Winter to him, as strange as it felt to describe an annual environmental phenomenon as such.

“Well, that’s that. Time to batten down the hatches.” Bow toggled a switch that lowered the gate’s barrings into place, with plenty of time to spare before the first winds came to meet them. The window rattled as the blizzard hit, bits of snow gleefully flying through the open space. Bow and Wow threw their hands up, confronted by a powerful breeze and cacophony of noise. The room’s lamp burst from the sudden change in air pressure, sending them into darkness and hastily driving them through the door back into safety.

“Cripes!” Bow barked, as they struggled to close the door against the torrent coursing through the space. “That window’s a menace!” As they slammed the guard room’s door shut again, ears ringing, Wowzowski swore he could just barely hear a soft crackling noise nearby, like ice cubes grinding together. “...Quibble’s probably gonna make us replace that bulb, too,” Bow complained, stomping his feet down the ladder leading into town. But Wowzowski stayed behind, transfixed on the odd noise.

He couldn’t quite pin its origin, but it nevertheless tied his stomach into tight knots.

Bow was right, of course. Petunia Quibble wasn’t going to have any open space without a proper light source during Winter, and chewed him out rather aggressively for not informing her of the stuck windowsill in the first place. He grumbled as he opened the door again, the wind thankfully having died down somewhat.

“Well, let’s get this over with, huh?” But Wowzowski had remained near the gate, distracted.

“Do you really not hear that?” He asked.

“What?”

“That... crackling noise.” Wowzowski wiggled his fingers by his ears to emphasize something or another, but Bow was having none of it and tossed the light bulb at him.

“If you don’t help me take care of this, the only crackly sound you’ll be hearing is the loose bits of your skull rattling around in your empty head.” Bow held a wooden board and hammer in his other arm, intending to at least block off the window if they couldn’t shut it.”

“I’m serious, I think there might be something wrong with the g- guh. Guh guh guh-” Wowzowski guhed, staring dead straight at the window behind Bow.

“Wh-?”

“Guh g-g-guh guh g-guh guh g-guh guh-” he dropped the bulb, which rolled across the floor.

“...What?”



Bow nearly bolted out of his skin as he turned to greet the eyes at the window. Their hollow gaze sucked the breath right out of his lungs and he toppled onto his back in panic. Wowzowski’s sputtering and the heavy winds faded away as the sound of breathing suddenly filled the room. No, not suddenly. It had been there the whole time, he just hadn’t noticed. It was there before he turned to look, before they’d entered the room, before the light had burst. He realized he could hear that breathing before Winter even started. Before he had been born. Before the first dogs were borne from the Trees and before the Gods and before any speck of living will existed to gaze upon the universe, he could hear that breathing. It held a consistent, unwavering rhythm, too perfect to be produced by any sort of fallible muscle or membrane.

Dark fingers slid through the crack, tendrils of frost shooting down the wall wherever they brushed. Bow’s mind was no longer capable of rational decision-making, but his body shuffled back reflexively to avoid the chill nipping at his feet. It wasn’t until his hand met the dropped bulb, pressing down hard and shattering it upon the pads of his palm, that he came to his senses. His body tense with a jolt of pain and adrenaline, he turned on his hip and leapt at Wowzowski’s stunned frame, sending the both of them toppling back through the open doorway and onto the interior catwalk. He

tried not to look back toward the window, but he could hear it buckling as the Specter continued pushing its arm through, and the glimpse of shifting mass in his peripheral vision were enough for his body to seize up once more. Just as the creature's fingertips stretched past the door frame, however, the light from the sun lamps dissolved its exposed skin, sending it recoiling back into the cold darkness of the blizzard. All that remained of the encounter was the inky shadow of the Specter's fingers burnt into the wooden walkway.

Petunia let out a hearty sigh, plopping an empty bowl down. Her dad was still on his fifth serving of stew, and she honestly had no idea where he put it all, but she always had to admit, Poppy was one heck of a cook. As if summoned by thoughts of good will, the opossum wandered into the dining room at that very moment.

"Heeeey, just put the little one to bed. She's been kind of lethargic with all this cold weather." She yawned slightly. Petunia thought she heard a single muffled thumping sound from somewhere outside, but it hardly struck her as unusual at the time. "Speaking of cold weather, how's about you and me have a good old fashioned snowball fight?" Poppy winked.

"What are you, six?"

"No, I'm an adult and I get to have fun if I want to. Don't be weird." Poppy seemed genuinely offended at Petunia's bouts of stuffiness.

"Alright, alright, fair enough." She relented. "We'll have *one* snowball fight."

Seven increasingly competitive rounds of snowball fighting later, Poppy laid defeated in the snow, finally overwhelmed by her friend's superior rate of fire.

"You... cheatsy... cat..." she huffed, as Petunia did a smug pirouette on the steps.

"Ho ho, if that's how you have to rationali-" Petunia stopped dead in her tracks, as her mind registered something she had just barely glimpsed.



"Why is the gate open?"

The atmosphere went dead silent as they both soaked in the statement. The gate was indeed open, or rather, it was completely off its hinges. It laid on the ground, in one solid chunk held together by the same bar intended to secure it, and in its place, an open doorway leading to the inky blackness of the Winter night. Petunia began hyperventilating, as she got down on all fours and sprinted toward the gate with disregard to her composed presentation.

“No, no no no no no no nononononono,” she muttered to herself, her breath disjointed. “Why is it like this? Why now? What is this?” Her questions were quickly answered as she reached the gate, bared claws clicking against the metal. The hinges themselves were fine, upon further inspection, but the chunks of eggshell they were attached to had been ripped off, their edges still covered in thick patches of the adhesive used to repair them earlier that Summer. They had become cracked and brittle in the Winter cold. “Fiddles!” she didn’t swear, crushing a piece in her hand, as Poppy caught up. “We completely forgot to consider thermal contraction when we ordered the gate repairs!”

“I don’t know what that means,” Poppy said confidently, flashing a thumb.

“It *means*, when the temperature drops, a material shrinks and becomes- *WhyamI giving a thermodynamics lesson*— We’ve got to get as many able bodies down here as we can, right now!” And with that, Petunia pulled out her phone and dialed a small string of numbers.

A small group of emergency volunteers arrived on the scene, some of them brandishing makeshift weapons. Petunia grimaced.

“Um. This isn’t that kind of emergency, but I suppose I appreciate the preparedne-“

“What happened to the gate!?” one of the men screamed, pointing at the open portal leading into the Blizzard.

“*That* would be the emergency,” Petunia put her foot down. “Now, I need two teams, one to help lift the gates back into place and the other to begin reinforcing it, this is no time for bickering, so I’ll be picking for you. You, you, you, you, you, you, and you...” she pointed at a select group of burlier townsfolk, “...will be the lifting team, and- Oh wait, Poppy’s already handled it.” Indeed, Poppy had picked up the gate with absolutely no effort and roughly slotted them into place, holding them up by the handles, an unsurprising achievement considering how easily she had torn them from their hinges to begin with.

“I guess everyone’s on reinforcement team, then!” The townsfolk began collecting supplies, large pieces of wood, sheet metal, various pieces of unwanted furniture and other odds and ends, and gathered them in a pile to be added to the growing barricade. Things were going quite well, in fact.

Right up until the sun lamps suddenly went out.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Petunia whimpered. Two massive failures in one hour. Right at the beginning of Winter. The volunteers began panicking, trying to get as far from the door as possible. “N-now wait, hold on! Things are still salvageable, we just need to finish reinforcing the door! Everyone stay ca-” There was a loud clanging sound on the other side of the door, the force of which sent even Poppy sliding several feet. The barricades were already faltering, and the gates began tearing away once more. Petunia knew a lost cause when she saw one. “*SCATTER!*” she yelled to the group, who needed no further motivating.

Poppy and Petunia bolted up the steps to the Quibble manor as the gate faltered behind them, holding their breath until they slammed the front door and turned on every available light in the household.

Petunia slid into her chair and flipped the switch on a microphone in her office, and in the blink of an eye, her panic and shaky demeanor melted away as she calmly spoke into it.

“~Attention, residents, this is your Assistant Mayor speaking~” Her voice was softer and friendlier than Poppy had ever heard it, like a preschool teacher fresh out of training, greeting her new charges. “~Unfortunately, at this time, our town has experienced lighting failures, and we have to issue a minor State Of Emergency while we resolve the issue. Please remain calm, stay indoors, and close all of your curtains

until our next broadcast. Do not panic, our brave volunteers and technicians are working hard to get the sun lamps up and running again. I repeat: Remain calm. Do not go outside and do not look out your windows. Try spending time with your family and loved ones while you wait. Thank you~” Petunia clicked the microphone off and then immediately began screaming.

“**WE’RE GOING TO DIE**,” she concluded.

“Wait, what happened to ‘our technicians are working hard’?” Poppy asked.

“I’ve already gotten word from the lighting station,” she raised her phone, tapping at messages on the screen. “It’s not the lamps, it’s the power routing system that runs through the town. Everything’s running on backup generators right now, but that’s nowhere near enough to get the lamps running. Those things consume like, 90% of our grid during Winter, we’d need to reset the system before we can do anything else.”

“So why isn’t there anyone stationed over at power right now?”

“Yes, why *isn’t* there anyone stationed there, I wonder?” Petunia pulled up a small social feed on her phone and checked out a specific profile she seemed to have memorized. “Oh, I see. It’s because *someone* decided to get off their shift early to go drinking!” The latest two blurbs on the user’s timeline read:

27m: *Staying warm on the first night of Wint, snow thanks for a full glass lol*

4m: *oh balls*

“Well, that guy’s fired,” Poppy noted the obvious.

“In any case, someone’s going to have to hit the breakers or we’re at a standstill.” Petunia paced into the living room and set her hand to her chin. “But the moment someone sets foot out there, they’ll be a frozen corpse walking. The routing system is halfway up the shell wall, maybe if someone from the lamps were to come down to it...” She narrowed her eyes. The winds outside was howling harder and harder, and even through the slight cracks in the curtain, there were shapes moving in the darkness. “No. These unnatural winds would likely lift them right off the catwalks. If the fall doesn’t kill them, then—”

“I’ll do it.” Poppy plopped a heavy hand on Petunia’s back. The cat was taken aback by the offer.

“Don’t be insane, Poppy.”

“I’m not. I’m the best fit for the job. Everyone else here has decades ahead of them, but me?” She gestured to the candles atop the fireplace. The first of seven had melted halfway down already. “I’m lucky if I’ve got that much left in me. Besides, I’m too heavy to be pushed around by winds, and it’s... It’s my fault the gate’s broken in the first place.”

“Even so, we’ve already got one specter prowling about out there, you’d never get across the ground level in time.”

“Not necessarily.” Mr. Quibble spoke up, to everyone’s surprise. “Believe it or not, this isn’t my first time in this sort of mess.”

“Dad, you can’t be serious. I’m not in the mood for tall tales about your ‘heroic youth’ right no—” but the old cat put up his hand.

“I have never told any tall tales, thank you, and you’d do well to give this one a listen. The sun lamps might be out of commission, but surely the lighting station’s got a bit of juice left for one final ploy.” Albus twirled his cane and winked at Poppy. “My dear, how do you feel about taking the spotlight?”

“I’m not one for performing, personally,” she replied, but Petunia caught the hint right away.

“A spotlight? Really, that works?” She marveled at the thought.

“Absolutely. When it comes to a Specter of Winter, any decent light trained on you is like having a 12-foot thick wall all around you.”

“Hold on, let me make a quick call.” Petunia sent a flurry of questions and hypothetical scenarios to her team up at the lights and within five minutes, had

formulated a plan. "Alright Poppy. This is what we're going to do."

From many stories above, peering through the glass floors of the lighting station, a jay gripped a set of binoculars to his eyes, his feathers bristling with anxiety. Against every instinct he had, he was keeping his eyes trained on the Specter of Winter lurking through the town below, thick sheets of ice following behind it. Even from that distance, and with the increasing snow partially obscuring the ground, he felt like it was looking back up at him and the sensation made him ill.

"Alright! The target's about to slip onto the East side street! It'll be breaking sightline with you in 10, be ready to go as soon as the light goes up," he chirped into a headset. Poppy's hand rested on the knob of the Quibble's back door, held just slightly ajar, with Petunia's phone raised to her ear in the other. Her thick jacket crinkled in the silence of the hall as the next ten seconds stretched on for an eternity, to the point where Poppy wondered if they'd chickened out, or weren't able to start the spotlight, or-

Her doubts were extinguished as a blinding light burst through the crack in the door and she wasted no more time with thinking. It took every effort for her not to blow the door out into the yard as she exited, and Petunia quickly snatched the handle again, as if the Specter was immediately going to beeline for the door once opened. Poppy stood out on the hill in the middle of town, completely exposed and lit up. And then, she calmly, and quietly began walking toward the South wall, on the opposite end of town from the gate. She would climb up the ladder system from there up to the Power Station. She couldn't risk running. She couldn't risk causing a ruckus, or accidentally outpacing the safety of the spotlight, or tripping and being outpaced by it. So she walked.

She walked very briskly, at least. After all, the spotlight wasn't going to be able to run for too long on backup power.

She passed by her own cozy little home in the backyard, where her daughter Lily was currently sleeping. Poppy felt a deep sense of relief that Lily couldn't lift the heavy door to her small bedroom on her own, and would likely sleep through the ordeal none the wiser. But a pit formed in her stomach, thinking about the real possibility that something would go wrong and Lily would wake up to learn her mother had thrown away her life in some crazy suicide mission. She shook those fears away, and found them immediately replaced by new ones. She'd gotten halfway down the hill, and while she'd managed to avoid thinking about it until then, she was quickly hit with the dread of being in a monster's den. She tried to focus on following the spotlight's path and relaying instructions, but she knew that somewhere behind her was a quick death if even one mistake was made. Reflexively, foolishly, she peeked over her shoulder at the street running through the East side of town.

She saw just enough of it. Its tail slipping behind the line of buildings, it's enormous frame just barely visible between the cracks dividing each structure. The Specter had a strange volume to it. Its form absorbed light so thoroughly that it's body appeared flat from every angle, a shadow propped up straight in the air. Poppy turned back and tried not to think about what she saw, a task as impossible as containing a gallon of water in a thimble. The feeling the glance had given her was as though her muscles had separated from her bones and were slowly peeling off as she walked. She could hear the lighting station's instructions in her ears, but she could no longer consciously comprehend them, her body continuing to follow them mechanically. Poppy's hand rested on the ladder without incident.

Petunia regretted relinquishing her phone without ensuring she had a backup to keep in touch with. She was going crazy not being in control of the situation. She had to know how Poppy was doing, but she knew she would regret looking out the windows. She bit at her claws, rolled around on the floor, tried staring into the crackling fireplace in a desperate attempt to keep her mind off it.

Just one look. One teeny tiny look. Her father tried to sternly remind her to follow her own advice to the townsfolk, but she could take one little look to confirm Poppy's position and be totally fine, right? She approached the window to open the curtain just a teensy smidge, and the instant she grasped the fabric, a large shadow swooped past the window and that settled it. No peeking. Nope. Never ever peeking. Another shadow appeared at the front of the house and confirmed a fear she knew was inevitable. More Specters were coming. Petunia shuddered to think how many were out there right now. She shuddered thinking about what would happen to their town if the lights couldn't

come back on. She shuddered thinking about the citizens starving in their homes, about people running out into the blizzard in madness, about eyes peering in through the windows at all hours. Petunia shuddered as Mr. Quibble laid her into bed and told her to rest.

Meanwhile, Poppy was starting to cheer up just a bit. She was still terrified out of her mind, but the tensest part of the journey was done the moment she left ground level. She climbed the ladders two rungs at a time and jogged past familiar sets of the wall-perched homes she always passed on her morning exercises.

“You’re doing great, Ms. Possum,” the voice in her ear assured her. “Now, you’ll want to skip this first ladder and take the next one down the line, and then you’ll be on the same level as the power station.” Poppy was tempted to whistle a cheery tune, if she wasn’t attempting to be relatively low-profile. “By the way, try not to look down, I’m hearing we’ve got 12 of these suckers roaming about at this point and it’s just ghastly.”

They both knew it was a stupid thing to say, that it was just his nerves letting his train of thought slip out at the wrong time. It was too late. Poppy’s eyes wandered and she saw all of them throughout the town, peeking into homes and putting hands down chimneys and, one by one, turning to stare directly at her with awful grins on their faces. All but one of them, in the Quibble’s yard. It... lingered. Poppy looked away in panic and pulled her collar down to throw up onto the wooden catwalk. It was unpleasant, but distracted her long enough to keep her moving forward.

“Uh, sorry,” her navigator chirped meekly.

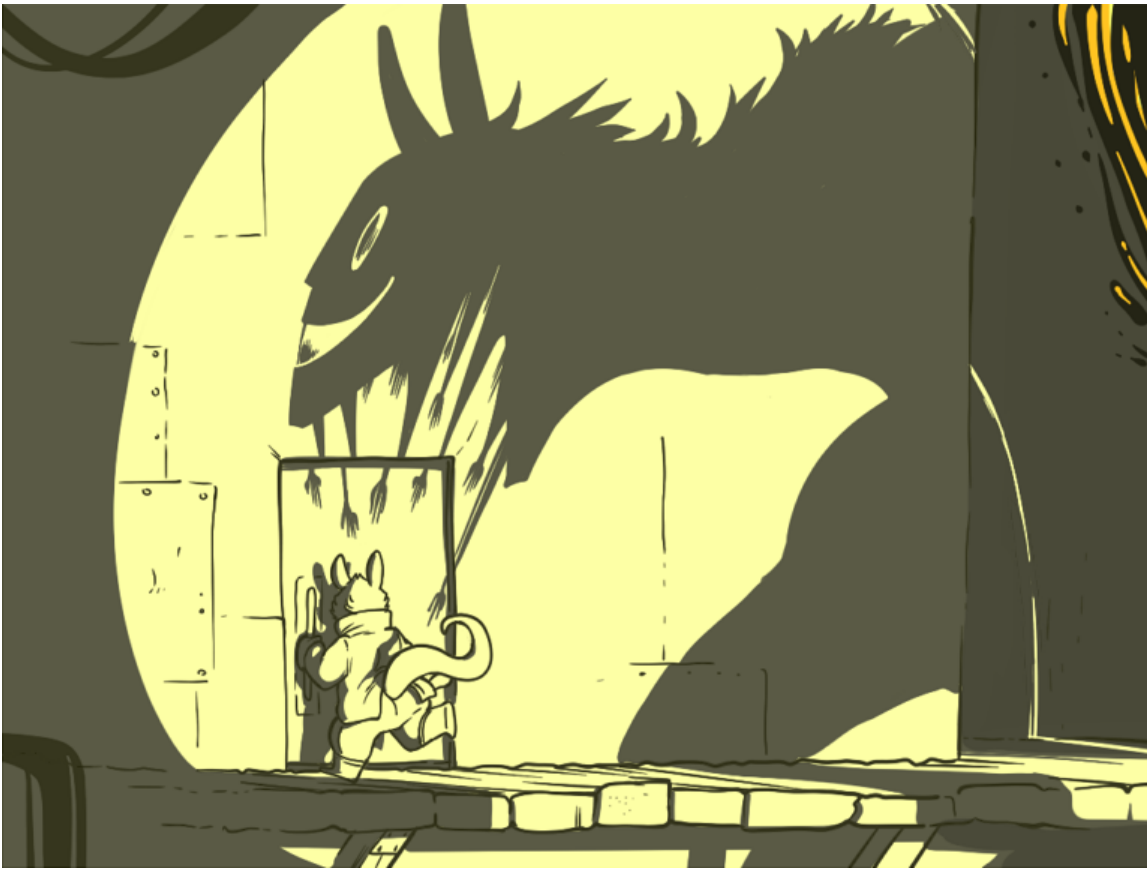
“It’s fine, let’s just get this done.” The spotlight was starting to dim and blink slightly, and she knew they had maybe a minute left, max. She scampered up the last ladder and began walking toward a moderately sized structure with all sorts of thick cables hanging from it throughout Eggton, swaying in the heavy winds. A sick groaning sound emerged from beneath her as her weight strained the planks, and Poppy found herself suddenly breaking through a patch of rotted wood back toward the layer below, which she smashed through as well. She swore, frustrated that she had to reascend those last two floors, but also that she had, however briefly, broken contact with the light, and the sensation of being in the dark made her violently panicked. Poppy refused to look back at the Specters again, but she knew they were making their way over to her, and she knew walking was no longer an option.

She began sprinting toward the next ladder, and, as if she needed any more incentive, the spotlight cut out entirely, barely managing pitiful flashes. She was left alone in the dark and the cold, desperately hoping she remembered her path well enough to retrace her steps. Below her, she could hear wood being smashed, and in her mind’s eye, she could see the massive hands grasping the catwalks, climbing floors at a time, homing in on her. She felt her own coughings squish beneath her boot and had never been so relieved to step in sick, slamming into the final metal ladder and hurling herself up it. The line on the other end of the phone sputtered to life.

“Opos—, where are you? We’ll hav- — light back up in just a mom—t, where should we poi-“

“JUST POINT IT AT THE STATION!!” She screamed into the receiver. She didn’t have the time or patience for guessing games. Poppy just barely avoided the gap she’d made earlier with a blind hop, quickly catching her balance at the other side. She was just yards away from the station door, and she could hear the smashing and breathing getting closer. She could make it. She was feet away now. She was going to make it. Inches away from the handle. She was absolutely going to

CHK-CHOOM



...If the light hadn't come on in that exact instant, she could not possibly have made it. Poppy slammed the door behind her.

And so the breakers were flipped. The lights came back. The gate was propped up and heavily, but crudely fastened into place, and Petunia gave out the PA broadcast declaring the state of emergency over. Everyone crowded around the bottom ladder to give Poppy their thanks and adulation, but she just laughed and waved them off, her interest in only one thing as she climbed back up the hill.

And then, she stopped laughing. The door to her home was open.

Poppy tore her meager living quarters apart in desperation before noticing the small footprints in the fresh powder, leading to the Quibble's garden. And there, in the exact center of town, in a pile of snow, was a small froz-

Petunia woke up screaming, and crying, and sick to her stomach. She just about stumbled down the stairs into the foyer, where Poppy and Mr. Quibble were having cups of tea and sharing looks of concern.

"Jeez, Tuna, you slam a door on your tail or what?" Poppy said, jokingly. Petunia couldn't understand how she could be okay at a time like this, after seeing her- But then she noticed, by the fire, Lily engrossed in a book about marine life. Petunia sunk to her knees, having never felt a stronger sense of relief in her life.

"Oh thank goodness, it was a dream." Petunia choked back tears. "Oh Poppy, I just had the most awful nightmare. We were overrun by Specters of Winter, after the gate wen- The gate!" She grabbed Poppy's shoulders. "Is the gate okay?!"

"What do you mean 'is it okay'? Of course it is. I helped reinforce it weeks ago myself. You know, for when it gets cold and the cement shrinks."

"Oh. You, uh. Know about thermal contraction?" Petunia chuckled nervously.

"...Petunia, I grew up in a *quarry town*. I know rocks."

"So... the gate didn't fall down."

“Nope.”

“And the sun lamp didn’t go out?”

“Of course not,” her father chimed in. “You know how obsessive I am about my lamps, dear.” Petunia stumbled over to the living room and sunk into the couch. She sighed like her souls were escaping through her lungs.

“Tuna, maybe you need to stop reading my sister’s books,” Poppy laughed. “I think she’s too strong for you.”

“I adamantly refuse,” Petunia stood her ground. “I accept any terrible price that having impeccable taste in fiction brings me.”

“Alright, weirdo, well, I’m gonna go get some fresh air.”

Poppy warmed her hands in her pocket, enjoying the gentle breeze flowing through her hair. Gate or force field, the Blizzard’s winds were always going to find some way to slip in, no matter what. She closed her eyes as a familiar sound filled her senses. The same sound she had heard all those years ago, when her sisters plucked her from the snow fields at the crack of Winter. A sound she had never stopped hearing, no matter the season. A sound that she realized she had always heard but never noticed, since before she was born. Since before anything else.

Breathing.

Waiting.